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## Faith-based Politics, Enlightened Moderation and the Pakistani Women's Movement

Afiya Shehrbano Zia<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Soon after his coup in October 1999, General Pervez Musharraf reassured the Pakistani people that his was not an obscurantist religious agenda. Instead, he referred to the Ata Turk model as his inspiration in his mission to rescue Pakistanis from corrupt democratic governments that had dominated the 1990s. A photo release of him holding two Pekinese dogs in his arms (commonly considered *na-paak* or unclean by Muslims) and surrounded by his short-haired wife, elderly mother and artist daughter, earned him a seal of approval from progressive upper-classes at home and the international community at large. Unlike the previous dictator, Gen Zia ul Haq, who carried out the oppressive and misogynist Islamisation project between 1977-88, this new-age military ruler seemed to espouse modern, 'secular' and liberal credentials. Thereafter began an era that has been dominated by several sociological changes in the country. In this article, three underlying concepts will be explored in relation to these changes and their impact on women. These include a critique of the romanticisation of the agency of women members belonging to the religio-political party in government; the strategic shifts in ideological positioning within the women's movement; and the impact of the debate over religion and secularism in relation to women's political reality. This essay discusses the interplay of the understandings and contradictions of Islamic and secular identity politics in the Pakistani women's movement. The methodology incorporates a reading of existing scholarship as well as observation of feminist activism in the political context of Pakistan.

*Keywords:* Islamist agency, secular feminism, Pakistani women's movement

### Enlightened Moderation

As a liberal dictator, one of the things Gen. Musharraf will undoubtedly be remembered for is the promotion of women's causes during his nine year rule as President of Pakistan (1999-2008). He will also be remembered for his infamous accusation of rape survivor, Mukhtaran Mai, as a case in point that women cry 'rape' every time they want to gain visa/asylum to Canada<sup>2</sup>. Under his leadership, women gained unprecedented rights in terms of political representation in Parliament; appointments in the federal cabinet; appointments in the armed forces and in public services, as well as patronage in the arts and cultural expression. Most importantly, we saw the reform of the discriminatory Zina Ordinance<sup>3</sup> against which the women's movement<sup>4</sup> had pitted a long-term struggle.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://english.aljazeera.net/archive/2005/09/2008410112050342208.html>

<sup>3</sup> These laws were passed in 1979 as part of Gen Zia ul Haq's Islamisation policy. The Zina Ordinance made adultery a crime against the state punishable by death and blurred the line between rape and

At the same time, it was during these years that women increasingly started observing the hejab, a form of scarving or veil not widely practised in Pakistan before; piety movements gained momentum such that women preachers now had large followings and even set up private faith-based institutions and schools. For the first time in Pakistan, the Islamist parties won substantive seats in Parliament. Most importantly, we saw a split in the women's movement after 25 years, when the right wing women's movement withdrew from the consensus that the discriminatory Zina Ordinance contravened the Quranic understanding of adultery. Instead, the right wing women reversed their long-standing support from the campaign to repeal this law. They actively organised protests and opposed, in Parliament, the efforts of the progressives to repeal or reform the controversial Zina laws.<sup>5</sup>

These contradictions and tensions make this period one of the most interesting and challenging for the women's movement. General Musharraf's very first speech assured the Pakistani people that his was not an obscurantist religious agenda. The reference was obvious – a distancing from the last military dictatorship of Gen Zia ul Haq (1977-88) whose Islamisation agenda targeted women and minorities and institutionalised legal and social discrimination. Zia's regime had also instilled a spirit of militancy in the army, as well as strengthened the cause of bigoted religious politics in the country. The liberals were relieved to not have another faith-based moral crusader in uniform.

The Enlightened Moderation theme of Gen. Musharraf's rule became the *raison d'être* for manoeuvring his continuation at the helm of state affairs rather than calling for elections and reverting to total civilian governance. The reason there was no concerted serious protest movement against this was, that liberals perceived him as a potential bulwark against the conservative ambitions of the previous government.<sup>6</sup> Unlike previous leaders, there was also a broad consensus that Gen. Musharraf was personally and materially incorruptible. The religious parties saw this as an opportunity to take advantage of swing votes, given the absence of leadership for the two leading parties, the liberal Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the conservative Pakistan Muslim League (PML). They also had the very recent 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war on terror as rallying points around which they focussed their campaign.

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consensual intercourse. Many hundreds of women have been victimised and jailed under this law. It has since been amended in 2006 under the Protection of Women Act.

<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I refer to the women's movement through a more inclusive definition which recognises women activists across the board regardless of their ideological location on the political spectrum. In general, the activists with a consciously feminist orientation and involved in human rights based work are referred to (by the media, analysts, and in development literature) as 'progressives' and 'liberals' while the more right wing women activists, usually associated with religious political parties, are perceived as 'radical' and 'conservative'. Gen Musharraf and his supporters positioned his rule as a 'moderate' wedge between these two ends of the political spectrum.

<sup>5</sup> Some of these debates are recorded in 'A Five Year Report on Performance of Women Parliamentarians in the 12<sup>th</sup> National Assembly (2002-2007)', Naeem Mirza and Wasim Wagma, Aurat Foundation Publication, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> This was the Pakistan Muslim League government under Nawaz Sharif, (1996-99).

## Democratic Opportunity for Islamists, Women and Islamist Women

Fresh elections to legitimise the military take over also provided an opportunity to the previously unsuccessful religious political parties to gain electoral success in 2002. In the four previous elections of 1988, 1990, 1993 and 1996, these parties never gained more than 3% of Parliamentary seats. This did not mean they did not exert influence on mainstream politics despite their lack of electoral strength. However, the atrophy of the main political parties, the PPP and the PML, was achieved when the leaders of both main parties went into exile after Gen. Musharraf's coup of 1999. This was to avoid the backlash expected from the military government's "accountability" process initiated soon after the 1999 coup. In 2001, the Mutahida Majlis e Amal (MMA-United Council for Action), was founded by the then amir<sup>7</sup> of the Jamaat e Islami,<sup>8</sup> Qazi Hussein Ahmed, who invited an alliance of six religious political parties. The MMA contested the elections called by General Musharraf to restore 'controlled' democracy under his leadership.

The trajectory of Islamist politics in the country is not the central concern of this essay. However, the political context is important when we consider the social backlash that resulted when, for the first time an Islamist alliance party gained substantial governmental power and was *democratically* instituted in Pakistan through the ballot box. The attendant alteration in the cultural landscape under the MMA has adversely affected Pakistan's political stability, politicised further the role of religion and has severely impacted women in particular.

Gen. Musharraf's "Enlightened Moderation" project was not just dismissed as a delayed political justification for his subversion of democratic governance in Pakistan, it was also mocked by analysts, commentators and even in popular cultural expression. Even the right wing political party leaders understood this afterthought, as a political posturing by (now) President Gen. Musharraf<sup>9</sup>, which he appropriated so that he may appear to western powers as the only liberal alternative to extremist threat after 9/11.

The right wing parties had always suspected the General as liberal in his disposition (just like the liberals hung onto this as a positive attribute, even if he was a military man) but they were never threatened by it. The only ones who seemed to take the enlightened moderation proposal seriously were the diasporic revivalists<sup>10</sup> who

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<sup>7</sup> Religious mentor/ leader

<sup>8</sup> The Jamaat e Islami was a reformist movement for Indian Muslims formed in 1941 which later went on to become a right wing Islamic political party in Pakistan. Its mass base includes an educated middle class and despite its ideology for a gradual Islamisation, the party never did well in any national election. For the 2002 elections, they allied with 5 other religio-political parties to form the MMA and subsequently, formed part of the government.

<sup>9</sup> Prior to his election as President through a controversial referendum in April 2002, Gen. Musharraf appointed himself as Chief Executive of Pakistan. In 2000, the Supreme Court delivered a judgement that justified the military takeover under the 'doctrine of necessity' and gave Musharraf a three year period to hold General Elections and restore democracy (Zafar Ali Shah Vs Pervez Musharraf, Chief Executive of Pakistan (PLD 2000 S.C 869)).

<sup>10</sup> Those involved in excavating an Islamic cultural relevance for Muslim societies as an alternate social order in place of post-colonial modernity. This scholarship and political mobilisation has gained momentum in the Islamophobic environment in western countries after 9/11. With reference to the women's movement, some of these scholars moved from their initial criticism of Islamisation projects in Muslim majority countries and now support women's rights within the Islamic discourse. These scholars define themselves as 'Islamic Feminists', however, not all within this movement support or call for a

considered this as a purported aim of Gen. Musharraf to impose a modernist, secular and by his own inspired claim, an “Ataturk model of modernity” onto Pakistan. As seen in the political events that unfolded after 2002, this was a seriously miscalculated evaluation.

Women’s organisations had for years been advocating for affirmative action to facilitate women’s political representation in political foray and this seemed like a pipe-dream. Even under the liberal government of the late Benazir Bhutto, women’s representation in Parliament was at a mere 1.4% and her party pleaded lack of political support from the Opposition to increase this quota.

However, the Legal Framework Order (2002)<sup>11</sup> under Gen. Musharraf made Constitutional changes that increased the number of overall seats in the legislature and increased the quota for reserved seats for women substantially. Apart from the (12) directly elected women, an unprecedented 60 seats for women were reserved for the 2002 elections. Women’s organisations worked dynamically with women candidates to campaign for these seats. The MMA won an overall 51 seats in the National Assembly of which 12 had to be filled by its women members.

Although strongly opposed to a woman as head of an Islamic state and complicit in preventing women from contesting for public office and even from exercising their right to vote, the MMA women readily accepted seats that were fielded by them on behalf of their male relatives. There is no better example of politics by proxy than this. Although traditionally, women representatives from other political parties do not fare any better and also tend to operate as male proxies, yet the religious political parties make no apology for this trend. Theirs is a clear agenda – take any opportunity, including those attributed as progressive, modernist means, only to subvert them towards conservative ends. Thus, despite opposing the quota accorded to women on principle, the MMA women representatives actively participated in the legislative process between 2002 and 2007. One MMA Parliamentarian is reported to have said that women should have separate, segregated assemblies to debate their issues and that MMA would avail of the reserved seats only to ensure repeal of this provision once they had built the political power base that would enable them to do so.<sup>12</sup>

The record of the MMA provincial government formed in the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP, neighbouring with Afghanistan), is a bleak trajectory that signals the political slide into *uber* conservatism as exemplified in the Hisba (Accountability) Act. This law originally proposed by the MMA in NWFP in 2003, in violation of the Constitution, essentially attempted to legalise gender apartheid by awarding the *Mohtasib* (Arbiter) the duty to protect Islamic values and etiquette and act as vigilante. Under his watch, a culture police was to be appointed for the ‘Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice’ to monitor the social and personal relationships and activities of citizens. It was passed by the NWFP legislative assembly on the second attempt but on a reference by Gen. Musharraf, was disallowed by the Supreme Court as contravention of the Constitution, in 2006.

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theocratic state. At the same time, some of these revivalist academics do not support or uphold feminist values either. In this essay, I recognise this distinction between Islamic Feminists and Revivalists with reference to women’s issues.

<sup>11</sup> Legal Framework Order (LFO) of 2002 indemnified Gen Musharraf’s coup and gave him an extension of five years as President among other constitutional changes.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Nazish Brohi, ‘The MMA Offensive; Three years in power 2003-2005’, Monograph by Action Aid, Pakistan, 2006, pg. 58.

Just like liberal and nationalist agendas are constructed across the body politic of women, the religious right too derives its moral authority from womanhood as a signifier of its ideological commitment to preserve male-defined, religiously ordained social order. Thus the MMA rule in NWFP based itself on a moral imperative to provide social order through vigilantism and remove all visible markers of womanhood from the public and relegate it to the private realm.

During the Musharraf years (1999-2008) on the one hand, we saw women being consciously inducted in public services, such as the first woman state bank governor, official female guards of Jinnah's<sup>13</sup> mausoleum, airline pilots, as coast guards and in the armed forces and senior positions in the bureaucracy. On the other hand, in the NWFP, a systematic drive was launched to remove any signs of womanhood in the public sphere. For example, women's shelters were attacked as western inspired initiatives that encouraged adultery and obscenity. In fact, a full fledged anti-obscenity campaign was conducted by the youth wing of the MMA whereby billboards and hoardings of women in advertisements were blackened with paint and torn down. The most symbolic act was the order by the provincial government that all mannequins must be removed from shops as they represented the (disembodied) female form in public. All forms of femaleness must be relegated to the private, domestic realm of the family. Women leaders and activists of the religious parties were at the forefront and complicit in such campaigns as well as, in efforts that actively prevented women from exercising their vote in local elections.<sup>14</sup>

These contradictions in the self-acclaimed liberal dispensation of General Musharraf's government peaked under his rule which had accommodated Islamist politics for political expediency. Although this is not untrue of previous dictatorships in Pakistan, the result this time, however, has influenced unprecedented social upheaval and an academic conflation of notions of what is liberal, secular, modern or traditional. This period split the liberals and conservatives alike. In principle, liberals were supporting a military dictator who wasn't quite dictatorial, yet he had accommodated the religio-political parties who instituted the most radical conservative drives in the NWFP. At the same time, Gen. Musharraf played the buffer in resisting their attempt to impose religiosity over state and cultural discourse.

The liberal/conservative or modernist/traditional divide worked in synch and harmony since it did not directly challenge the interests of the liberal elite, who in turn supported a (politically conservative) military under a liberal leader. The military in turn was receiving moral and financial support for its frontline role in the war on terror and thus (ostensibly) breaking from its traditional support of *jihadi* militants.<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> Mohammed Ali Jinnah, (1876-1948) first Governor General and the Quaid or founder of Pakistan.

<sup>14</sup> Afiya Shehribano, *The Invisible Woman*, The News, Karachi, April 21, 2005, <http://thenews.com.pk>

<sup>15</sup> Ahmed Rashid describes *jihadi* militants in Afghanistan as those who wage militancy so as to impose a new Islamic order by adopting the *shariah* or Islamic order not for the purpose of pursuing justice or any social benefits but as a means to regulate personal behaviour and a regime that sustains itself through punitive rule. Rashid describes this as a perversion of the original meaning of jihad which during Prophet Muhammad's time was understood as the struggle to improve the self and/or transform a corrupt society. The Pakistani secret service, military and intelligence agencies invoke the notion of jihad as a holy war and use this as a training ethos and have historically relied on it as a metaphor for the struggle for the liberation of Indian-held Kashmir and against the communist occupation of Afghanistan. Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Penguin 2003, England.

conservative religious parties who opposed this role as America's ally, still stayed in government to gain credibility as a legitimate democratic entity. Through provincial governance they actively radicalised the socio-cultural political environment by wedding religious codes with and by, furthering cultural conservatism.

However, my interest in exploring these contradictions is not speculative. Rather, I am interested to look through the lens of the women's movement to assess how these developments have reflected and impacted the strategic positions and the identity politics within the Pakistani women's movement itself. In other words, the inherent contradictions within the progressive women's movement of the 1980s onwards, with regard to its strategic relationship with religion, is a mirror reflection of the interplay of overall religious and secular identity politics played out from 2002 to 2008. This has left the women's movement more polarised on the issue of whether it is still possible to reclaim the potential of religion to lobby for women's rights in the Muslim context or, if the only choice is now to remain wary of the religious idiom and stick to secular credentials and base its demands on a universal human rights discourse.<sup>16</sup>

### **Faith-based Feminisms**

The first generation of Islamic modernist feminists<sup>17</sup> believed in the participatory nature of religion, as well as the 'psychological healing' and the 'solace and solidarity',<sup>18</sup> it may provide in the absence of alternatives, particularly for women from lower classes. This attribution of women's religious expressions as a placation or compensation for their social class is also not new. Linked to the critique of the urban-based, bourgeois women's movement has been the suggestion that one reason for the failure of mass mobilisation of women across classes, was because they chose to posit their politics outside of the religious framework.

Contemporary new scholarship challenges this limited attribution. Revivalist literature by academics studying contemporary Islamic movements, advocate the viability of re-instituting alternative Islamic economic, legal and political systems. They do not consider such projects to be simply reactions to Western colonialism and imperialism. With regard to the study of women activists of such Islamic political movements in Pakistan, this literature challenges the notion that right wing women are pressurised to join Islamic political parties. It also challenges the idea that Islam/an Islamic state is

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<sup>16</sup> The emergence of all these identity conflicts cannot be read in an historical vacuum. Many of the socio-political crises came to a head during this period but were in continuation of growing violence and conservatism that pre-date 9/11. The contention here is that during the Musharraf regime, the conservative elements and faith based religious parties sought to expand their brand with renewed zeal in the wake of 9/11 and in an effort to reclaim and articulate all symbols and policies based purely on an imagined Islamic identity.

<sup>17</sup> Feminists concerned with empowerment of their gender within a 'rethought Islam' and are involved in reinterpreting and re-examining a masculinist reading of the Quran (divine Holy Book of Muslims) and *Shariah* (Islamic law derived from the Quran and compiled sayings of the Prophet of Islam, Prophet Muhammad. Riffat Hasan and Asma Barlas are well-known academics residing in the USA who fall in this category. In Pakistan, Islamic feminist scholarship is most often associated with Farida Shaheed heading the NGO, Shirkat Gah and is a south asian contact for the Women Living Under Muslim Laws network.

<sup>18</sup> Farida Shaheed, "*Women's Experiences of Identity, Religion and Activism in Pakistan*" in 'The Post-Colonial State and Social Transformation in India and Pakistan', S.M.Naseem and Khalid Nadvi (Eds), Oxford University Press, 2002, pg 367.

oppressive for women as defined by orientalist literature or that women's resistance, agency and autonomy must be the opposite of subordination.<sup>19</sup>

The Islamic feminists of the 1980s in Pakistan wished to sieve out the patriarchy from a male-defined Islam and saw religion as a pawn abused by an oppressive state. Their project became to reclaim feminist possibilities within a reformed Islam and they were well supported by sympathetic international donors for such efforts. However, this strategy, despite some acclaim by Iranian Islamic feminists, has been criticised for paying a price whereby the feminism part of Islamic feminism gets subsumed and relegated as a lesser appendage to the more compelling and overarching Islamic phenomena. Islam as a political strategy is increasingly becoming a limited empowering tool for the Islamic feminist reformist project – instead it has become a legitimate mobilising strategy almost exclusively for the radical right.<sup>20</sup>

The Islamic feminists clearly discredited the patriarchal Islamist project that aimed to inscribe religion onto the state and convert it from a secular entity into a sacred one.<sup>21</sup> The more recent scholarship from revivalists argues exactly the same but opposes the end analysis. Humeira Iqtidar suggests that yes, Islamists wish to inscribe religion onto the state but by virtue of this imposition, will be converting the sacred (agenda of religiosity) into a secular entity (state politics), rather than the other way around.<sup>22</sup> She upholds that since all secular states are essentially premised on religious faith, why can Islamic politics not be an equal contender for the secular label? What she doesn't specify is a repeated question asked by Pakistani secularists – what kind of a state does this project envision? What laws, economy and processes will it be governed by and what would the citizenship of women and minorities be based upon? In other words, what is the political or indeed, economic relevance of this proposition?

Meanwhile, various western governments propelled by their own political compulsions, seek to fund such introspection, research and development by looking for alternative expressions of a 'soft' Islam in Muslim countries. This is pandering to and resulting in apologia literature and diluted political insight into the dynamics of fundamentalist strategies. Worst of all, it is premised on essentialist notions that in

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<sup>19</sup> With reference to women and Pakistan this literature includes my readings of Humeira Iqtidar, *The Changing Role of 'Muslim Fundamentalists'*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Cambridge, UK, 2008, Faiza Mushtaq, 'Al-Huda: New Forms of Islamic Education' (paper presented at the 'Miskeen' study group in Karachi). Others would include Sadaf Aziz, 'Beyond Petition and Redress: Mixed Legality and Consent in Marriage for Women in Pakistan' and Moeen Cheema and Abdul Rahman, 'From Hudood Ordinances to the Women's Protection Act, papers presented at the 3rd Social Sciences Annual Conference at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, December 2007, which look to tackle the woman question from a new perspective located entirely within Islamic jurisprudence. Amina Jamal's work and doctoral thesis, similarly, explores the potential of a 'balanced modernity' amongst right wing women activists inspired by modern Islamic revivalism (see bibliography for a list of her work).

<sup>20</sup> For detailed critique on Islamic feminism in Pakistan, see Afia S Zia, 'The Reinvention of Feminism in Pakistan', *Feminist Review*, Issue 91, South Asian Feminisms; Negotiating New Terrains, Editors, Firdous Azim, Nivedita Menon and Dina M Siddiqi, Palgrave Macmillan, London, UK, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Farida Shaheed, *Gender, Religion and the Quest for Justice in Pakistan*, Report for United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) & Heinrich Boll Stiftung project on Religion, Politics and Gender Equality, Geneva, 2009, pg 37.

<sup>22</sup> Humeira Iqtidar, *The Changing Role of 'Muslim Fundamentalists'*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Cambridge, UK, 2008, pg 163.



Muslim majority countries, it is the religious identities that are foremost considerations when analysing socio-political behaviour.

The Islamic Revivalist movement globally is usually dated to the 1970s and refers to a resurgent ethos, sensibility and even academic interest in Islam in contemporary Muslim societies. Such a movement includes the women's mosque or piety movements which often began informally and sometimes were linked to social welfare and only later became more organised and structured. Some contemporary revivalist Pakistani scholars<sup>23</sup> quote revivalist literature stating that since there is no formal church or clergy in Islam, thereby there is no possibility of calling for a separation of state and religion, or for secularisation. The suggestion is that Islam is, by this definition, already secular. However, to the extent that there is de facto state power held by many a clergy in Muslim-majority states, or who hold the state hostage through competing religious idioms, this automatic secular theory is a myth.

In any case, the larger point is that dismantling the structures of political Islam will not challenge the increasing privatisation of religion in Pakistan.<sup>24</sup> This private realm is the point of entry for faith-based activism and intervention and the point where Islamists are most successful. This private realm has become the site where both Islamic feminists and revivalists base their analysis and hope for potentially liberating faith based politics, particularly for women. Their differences come about in the understanding of politics.

While Islamic feminists consider religion a *private* spiritual, cultural and social vehicle of empowerment, the revivalists invite the *political* expression of belief as a legitimate mode of women's agency and liberation. They also differ on the nature and role of the state but revivalist women, beyond their rejection of western universalism, secular laws and modernity as a colonial imposition, have not outlined their vision as clearly. Some works-in-progress advocate the need for Islamic jurisprudence and authentic structures such as Qazi courts to replace the post-colonial judicial systems in Islamic republics such as Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> However, these are already the demands of some Islamist parties and even the Taliban, in Pakistan. Thus such demands from these scholars and academics (mostly western educated themselves) overlap within the realm of conservative politics. Also, such demands are deeply contested amongst Islamic scholars, including those within Pakistan.

Having said that, since Islamic feminists in Pakistan are clear about their demand for a secular or non-theocratic state, their demand for the repeal of Islamic laws and separation of religion from state business is a consistent one. By this token they can also continue to simultaneously work on feminising women's relationship with religion within the private or social sector. However, revivalists challenge this demarcation by illustrating the lived realities of women involved in piety and faith-based movements and

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<sup>23</sup> See note 18

<sup>24</sup> By privatisation of religion I do not imply that religious expression has therefore dissipated from the public. Instead, social conservatism has increased precisely because personal expressions of religion are influencing public articulations to the exclusion of other forms of sociability. This includes language, dress, and a general conflation of Islam with everything that is to do with 'Arab-ized' culture as a conscious effort to counter south asian (Indian) influences.

<sup>25</sup> Discussion at a seminar, The 3rd Social Sciences Annual Conference at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, December 2007, Lahore, Pakistan. Qazi courts would be presided by Islamist jurists or 'qazis'. Currently, Pakistan's judiciary runs on a secular model inherited from colonial India.

insist this should be seen as political and a valid instrument of empowerment, mobilisation and expression of women's attempts to cross the private/public divide.

It is important to point out the lack of debate and discussion within or indeed, between the various factions of the women's movement in Pakistan. Even the upper-class, urban-based, academic feminists tend to dismiss challenges, critiques or even dialogue with dissenters or conservative elements, as a waste of time because there are so many 'real issues' or (usually, donor funded) projects to get on with. This paper does not suggest that the shift in ideologies within the women's movements in Pakistan have come about through any conscious debate or consensus. Rather, this paper argues that competing theories on the role of religion in relation to women are shifting due to academic interests on the subject rather than out of a political engagement. The central argument in this paper challenges the temptation within this scholarship to promote the practices and activism of the right-wing women as indicative of a newly founded liberationist alternative to western feminism and universal rights.

### **Contesting for Primacy in the Private Realm**

On one level, Pakistani feminists have been concerned with disentangling the state policy of Gen. Zia that attempted to limit women to the *chador* and *chaardevari*<sup>26</sup> which relegated women's primary roles as domestic. At the same time, some feminists equally recognise, emphasise and value the private spaces and sanctuaries that women have created to fulfill their spiritual needs. This has meant that practices such as *dars*<sup>27</sup> and *khatams*<sup>28</sup> are assessed as empowering strategies in an environment where they lack democratic or domestic relevance.

Hence, today the challenge is not simply from an overtly theocratic state that is pushing an Islamist agenda but fragmented, organised faith-based (almost always gender-segregated) interest groups. They compete for legitimacy in routine politics and for relevance in the social fabric of the country. This growing piety movement includes many women religious leaders and home-based preachers, several of whom have successfully activated networks and mobilised communities to spread their word. Often, though not always, the women's theology groups are purported for the cause of women's rights in Islam. What used to be the strategies and vocabulary of the liberal and upper class non-governmental organisations' (NGO) women activists, have been claimed by these supposedly more 'indigenous' Islamic women's rights activists.<sup>29</sup> These Islamist women may not be overtly politicised as yet but certainly are involved in (what is commonly known in NGO vocabulary as) 'advocacy' towards this end.

Amina Jamal's (2005) work on Jamaat e Islami<sup>30</sup> (JI) women's political activism argues that the secular women's movement in Pakistan has refused to recognise the Jamaat women's agency and only see this in terms of a passive submission to Jamaat men. Jamal warns of the danger of denying the autonomy and emancipatory self-definition of Jamaat women. Jamal suggests this denial allows some (secular) feminists to re-present

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<sup>26</sup> Literally, the veil and the four walls of the home – ie, the private, domestic realm was appropriate for women.

<sup>27</sup> Piety movements, or informal study groups on Quran and discussions on Islam.

<sup>28</sup> Literally 'the end' prayers usually held at funerals followed by sermons.

<sup>29</sup> Amina Jamal, 'Feminist 'selves' and feminism's 'others'; feminist representations of Jamaat-e-Islami women in Pakistan, *Feminist Review*, Issue 81, 2005, pg 19, [www.feminist-review.com](http://www.feminist-review.com)

<sup>30</sup> See note 7.

the right wing women as victims of false consciousness so that they may construct their own identities as feminists with a modernist agenda, particularly against Islamisation.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, Jamal's own work attempts to highlight the effectiveness of Jamaat women's autonomous attempts to appropriate modernity towards their own ends and their understanding of rights. These modern social and political rights, according to the Jamaat women that Jamal interviews, should enhance, not repress Islamic values. She quotes from an interview of a woman activist of the Jamaat e Islami (JI) who explains that while Jamaat women are modern, they are not westernised.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, Humeira Iqtidar's (2008) work on women in the Jamaat e Islami (JI) and Jamaat ud Dawa (JuD),<sup>33</sup> also questions the notion that women are pressurised or coerced to conform to piety movements or join Islamist parties.<sup>34</sup> Her theoretical perspective relies on scholarship that challenges the modernisation framework and which looks to include religion as a legitimate category of political analysis. She argues that the religious agency and belief of women activists of right wing political parties in Pakistan, is not blind but rather, is historically and culturally grounded and therefore, substantive.

Iqtidar (2008) goes further than Jamal on two points which argue that women's agency can be mediated by religious belief and does not have to be consciously feminist. Her research finds that resistance to male domination may be incidental rather than purposeful in the activism of these right wing women. Secondly, her analysis of these religious political parties suggests that by rejecting or failing at secular careers, women who join these Islamist parties find independent avenues which afford these women, liberation. She also quotes scholarship that suggests that the status of women in post-revolutionary Iran or indeed, under any Islamised regimes may have carried "certain advantages" and in any case, should not be analysed through any "de-contextualized categories".<sup>35</sup> Further, Iqtidar contends that by bringing religious belief into the public sphere and recognising it as a motivating factor, this trend is secularising Muslim societies.<sup>36</sup>

Where Jamal (2005) and Iqtidar (2008) stop short in their attribution of agency to women activists of Islamist parties, is when they do not acknowledge the purpose of the agency and the conservative ends towards which it is used. The few examples that Jamal does quote in terms of Jamaat women emulating secular feminist strategies and methodology of politicking, may be countered by the many instances where they also support anti-women legislation and policies.

Both scholars rely on Saba Mahmood's challenge to feminist theory which assumes that agency must be substantive and informed by a feminist consciousness.<sup>37</sup> Instead, Mahmood argues that in fact, piety movements prove that agency can be attributed even to passive, docile non-action and preservation of the status quo and that feminist politics is not a natural desire. Humeira Iqtidar concludes through her dialogue

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<sup>31</sup> Jamal, 2005, pg 17.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pg 20.

<sup>33</sup> Humeira Iqtidar, *The Changing Role of 'Muslim Fundamentalists'*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Cambridge, UK, 2008

<sup>34</sup> Iqtidar, above cited, pg 166.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pg 170.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, pg 163.

<sup>37</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, 2005.

with a woman member of Jamaat ud Dawa, that Islamist parties can be oppressive for some but liberating sanctuaries for others.<sup>38</sup> The political experience in the Pakistani context, however, has shown that faith based agency of women in religious parties is not just often used for non-feminist ends but increasingly to actively support a patriarchal Islamic agenda.

Three different examples help to put this contention into context.<sup>39</sup> The first is an observation on the role and performance of right wing women representatives and the political positions they took on women's issues in Parliament between 2002 and 2008. Apart from the overall conservative and anti-women legislation and policies promoted in the NWFP discussed above, within the national Parliament too there were clear ideological divides on legislation regarding women's rights. When the opposition party, the PPP, proposed a bill on domestic violence, it was resisted by several male members from the ruling party (PML-Q) as well as the religious party, MMA. This led to a heated debate and women Parliamentarians staged a protest in the Assembly when the (male) Parliamentary secretary opposed the bill on the grounds that a Muslim husband had the right to admonish and even beat his wife if she was disobedient.

In an impressive move of going against the party line, Samia R. Qazi, member of Parliament representing the religious party, the MMA (daughter of the amir of the JI, Qazi Hussein Ahmed), defended the domestic violence bill by taking a stand against the Parliamentary secretary's interpretation of the Quranic verse. Admittedly, Samia Qazi's intervention was in support of protecting women from gratuitous marital violence as interpreted by male readings of religious verses. At the same time, her intervention record shows that she supported the larger understanding that a woman of a 'certain character' and attitude may warrant light beatings but this should not become an excuse for men to use wives as punching bags.<sup>40</sup> Such stances can be read as proof of agency of Islamist women but not only is this merely non-feminist but indeed, actively upholds a patriarchal coercive social order or contract with reference to 'appropriate' matrimonial obedience or conduct.

The second exemplar with regard to Islamist women's agency is in connection with the Jamia Hafsa incident in 2007 which was simply a precursor of the potential of the *personal* religious agency of women being converted in to *political* activism. The Jamia Hafsa women students belonged to a religious school or *madrassa* part of the Lal Masjid mosque in the capital city of Islamabad. They illegally occupied the premises adjoining the mosque land in protest against the government's threat to demolish and reclaim it as a suspected hotbed for terrorist indoctrination. The Jamia Hafsa women students conducted a vigilante puritanical drive against 'unislamic' practices, such as the sale of music and by demanding that video shops shut down. They also kidnapped a woman from the neighbourhood suspected of running a prostitution business and only let

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<sup>38</sup> Iqtidar, cited above, pg. 174.

<sup>39</sup> Although there are plenty of cases where the women members of religious parties such as the JI/MMA have taken outright anti-women stands, the examples quoted here are deliberately chosen to acknowledge the agency of these women as claimed by the revivalist scholars. However, the point here is to highlight that even when this agency is seemingly neutral, it in fact supports and bolsters a patriarchal, discriminatory social, political and economic order.

<sup>40</sup> 'A Five Year Report on Performance of Women Parliamentarians in the 12<sup>th</sup> National Assembly (2002-2007)', Naeem Mirza and Wasim Wagha, Aurat Foundation Publication, Pakistan, pg. 142-150.

her go once she ‘repented’. Eventually, a few months later, the seminary was stormed by state troops which led to the death of many in the mosque and while the government denies any women students were killed in the shoot-out, there has been no transparent inquiry or report on the action.

Women’s rights and human rights groups in Pakistan protested against the vigilantism of the Jamia Hafsa women students. At the same time, they also disputed the need for such disproportionate use of state force when troops launched a military operation (Operation Silence, 10<sup>th</sup> July, 2006) against the mosque where the clerics and students were lodged, armed and refused to vacate the state property. The visuals of these women students (which are also available on Youtube) show hundreds of women completely clad in black veils and holding bamboo sticks. However, other Islamist parties, including their women activists, have remained silent on this issue. They do not publicly support nor condemn such action nor do they express solidarity with the women of Jamia Hafsa as a political statement. The only exception was the Jamaat e Islami women’s wing which held a press conference in July 2008, one year after the incident and after losing the national elections in February 2008. Former MNA (Member of National Assembly/Parliament) and representative of the JI, Saima Qazi, accused the former government (which included her!) as desecrating “Islamic principles such as burqa, veil and beard”<sup>41</sup> with reference to the Jamia Hafsa incident. She also demanded that an Inquiry on the incident should be held but made no comment as to the actions of the JH women themselves or to their politics or action.

A third example of the kind of agency demonstrated by women in relation to gendered religious identities is more complex. After the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in Nov. 2008, the pressure on the Pakistani government led to a crackdown for hunting suspects believed to be members of Jamaat ud Dawa (JuD). This organisation is considered to be a front or cover for the banned extremist religious group, Lashkar e Tayabba (LeT). In defence of the Jamaat ud Dawa, some 200 Hindu minority women in Sindh came out to protest against this state action in support of this banned terrorist organisation.<sup>42</sup> They claimed that JuD supported their poor community and gave them protection and services. Importantly, these women crossed gender and religious boundaries to support those who would ordinarily be their religious antagonists. I submit, the progressive Women’s Action Forum<sup>43</sup> has difficulty mobilising 200 *Muslim* women to protest on cases of rape or violence, leave alone reaching to minority communities to support their causes. This, despite the fact, that many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been involved in service delivery and developing relationships with the communities for some 30 years now.

The contention is then, that religious affiliation and empowerment from within the religious discourse may be completely independent of delivering or receiving human rights and development (quite different from philanthropy). Thus, the system of patronage as used by religious organisations extends itself out to minority communities

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<sup>41</sup> ‘JI for commission to probe Jamia Hafsa tragedy’, Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> July 2008, The News International, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/print1.asp?id=123312>

<sup>42</sup> ‘Pak Hindus rally to support Jamaat ud Dawa’, Dawn, December 16th, 2008, [www.dawn.com/2008/12/17/nat4.htm](http://www.dawn.com/2008/12/17/nat4.htm)

<sup>43</sup> Women’s Action Forum (WAF) is an urban based forum and pressure group that was formed in 1981 to struggle against the imposition of discriminatory Islamic laws. It has chapters in four main cities in the country and is a non-funded, non-hierarchical organisation.

(too) while simultaneously making them targets of legal and social discrimination as part of their religious ethos. Either way, the hegemonistic intent of these faith-based organisations, which are often linked to religious political parties, is clearly political rather than merely charitable. Both ways, such a strategy can work its faith based politics or agency, to liberate and oppress at the same time.<sup>44</sup> This is true for women and minority concerns alike.

### Cultural Authenticity

The central anguish of the revivalists, particularly in the Islamophobic environments of western countries in the post 9/11 era, is over how Muslim countries have adopted wholesale modernist agendas of western governments and ideologies of western feminisms. This is not a new accusation, since conservatives and Islamists including Gen. Zia ul Haq himself, repeatedly attempted to de-legitimise women activists who challenged the state for equal rights, as being ‘westernised’. Yet, 30 years later when the feminists of the second wave<sup>45</sup> have not only entrenched their politics and gathered support at grassroots levels, it’s a misplaced indictment that is rarely officially issued from Islamists in Pakistan, as it is from diasporic contexts.<sup>46</sup> Islamophobia has become pivotal in the consciences of diasporic Muslims, it seems, when analysing secular resistance in Muslim countries. Diasporic analysis also tends to fetishize and romanticise Islamist movements, particularly its women activists.

The contradiction in placing premium on the “authentic believing” Muslim woman as opposed to the westernised secular Muslim woman is clear in two perspectives on this issue. On the one hand, Amina Jamal’s analysis attempts to highlight that in fact, the values, goals and efforts of Jamaat e Islami women are located in a modernist discourse and not some traditionalist one.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, Humeira Iqtidar’s work suggests that modernity is a construct that must be rejected and she suggests that by redefining agency and liberation, we can accept that these can be defined in religious terms, as well as non-feminist, respectively.<sup>48</sup> According to both views, whether we

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<sup>44</sup> This is different from Humeira Iqtidar’s suggestion that it is only a matter of ‘perception’ that Islamist parties may be oppressive for some because others may feel liberated by joining them. The point here is that the agenda of such an ideology is to allow liberation only if the ‘freed agent’ accepts an overall discriminatory or unequal framework. Quite different from the criticism that willing members are victims of ‘false consciousness’, my point is that these members do accept the limited and unequal status of women and minorities by *consciously* justifying and rationalising them within the modernist discourse.

<sup>45</sup> The second wave of the women’s movement in the 1980s and 1990s pivoted around a dynamic and sustained struggle against the military dictatorship of Gen Zia ul Haq (1977-88) who made women direct targets of a misogynist state under his purported Islamisation project. The women’s movement is acknowledged as perhaps the strongest challenger of this very politically and socially oppressive historical period.

<sup>46</sup> Observation by renowned human rights activist and lawyer, Asma Jahangir, who is often at the receiving end of criticism and threats for exposing human rights abuses, both those committed in the name of religion as well as by the state. She notes the wave of such accusations against her personally and against women activists who identify with a liberal politics within Pakistan, has reduced considerably; private conversation, March 2009, Lahore.

<sup>47</sup> Amina Jamal, *Gendered Islam and modernity in the nation-spaces; women’s modernism in the Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan*, Feminist Review, Issue 91, 2009, Palgrave Macmillan, London, UK, [www.feminist-review.com](http://www.feminist-review.com).

<sup>48</sup> Humeira Iqtidar, ‘The Changing Role of Muslim Fundamentalists’, Doctoral dissertation, University of Cambridge, UK, 2008, pg 187.

accept or reject modernity as defined by the secularists' worldview, this allows an acknowledgement of Islamist women's agency as historically more relevant and culturally grounded.

However, both sets of analyses belong to what I term, political nunneries.<sup>49</sup> These are ethnographies that attribute agency as part of an anthropological effort to (re) construct an ideological framework for a political alternative to liberal notions of secular modernity. In the process, they stop short of contextualizing the political articulations of the agency that they recognise or ascribe to Islamist women that they study. In other words, when this agency converts into political articulation, there is no discussion of the implications, outcome or effects of such agency which has been, in the experience of Pakistan, both vociferously anti-women at worst, or silent and hence complicit, at best.

Religious political parties claim to be true protectors of women as long as women adhere to their domestic domain, since the family is considered to be the locus of women's security. In a monograph that records the actions and stances of the MMA between 2003 and 2005, Brohi lists a series of cases of violence against women in the NWFP during the leadership of the MMA government.<sup>50</sup> She notes the repeated silence on these cases including violent rapes, forced marriages and honour killings against which MMA claims to be vehemently opposed. Even beyond the NWFP, on the publicised case of the *jirga*<sup>51</sup> ordered rape of Mukhtara Mai, which was condemned by activists across the ideological divide, women members of the MMA, at a seminar in Lahore, demanded a ban on NGOs whom they held responsible for "harming the country by raising the Mukhtara Mai issue".<sup>52</sup> Brohi notes, "The MMA's strategy for preventing violence against women such as rape, gang rape and harassment is to reduce to minimum if not eliminate, their interaction with men".<sup>53</sup>

Against this backdrop then, it is difficult to understand how these religious political parties can be understood to be potential reformists and ideologically liberating spaces, rather than politically radical and indeed, conservative to the point of being fascistic, as in the above examples.

### Some Proposals of Reconciliation

The temptation to conflate cultural purity with Islam as found in the new revivalist scholarship poses a practical challenge for the women's movement in Pakistan. The approach of such a self-acclaimed "reconstructive project"<sup>54</sup> suggests that "[Since] customary practice is very often the locus of offending norms, particularly in the area of

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49 Afiya S. Zia, 'Challenges to secular feminism in Pakistan: a critique of Islamic feminism and revivalism', Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, UK, Occasional Paper No 29, ISSN: 1476-7511, pg 14.

50 Nazish Brohi, *The MMA Offensive; Three years in power 2003-2005*, Monograph by Action Aid, Pakistan, 2006, pg 62-66.

51 Tribal assembly of male elders which resolves disputes through consensus. Jirgas are outlawed by the state but function effectively as a parallel legal system in tribal and rural areas and increasingly in urban pockets of Pakistan.

52 State of Human Rights in 2005, Annual Report by Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Lahore, Pakistan, published by Maktaba Jadeed Press, 2006.

53 Brohi, 2006, pg 67.

54 Sadaf Aziz, 'Beyond Petition and Redress: Mixed Legality and Consent in Marriage for Women in Pakistan', 2005, in *Bayan*, Published by Simorgh, Lahore, Pakistan, pg 60.

forced marriages in Pakistan, the implantation of Islamic legality in this sphere is a greater bulwark against such practices in that an alternate social order is proposed....”<sup>55</sup>

This project overlaps with the Islamic feminist one that attempts to separate patriarchal cultural practices from ‘pure’ religion. It is also the locale where secular feminists have struggled the most in their realisation that women’s sexuality is the site where both culture and religion collude to control and measure society’s moral order. Thus the latter’s concern is not so much on the interpretation of the law but over the fact that patriarchal culture and/or religion will dominate any translation of the social order. These feminists are not looking for bulwarks, rather they are looking to uproot and transform gender relations to ensure that women’s choices are neither divinely legally ordained nor sanctioned by a patriarchal culture.

Conventional Islamic punishment, such as stoning to death which is practised in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, is not executed in Pakistan. Yet the informal, parallel legal structures institutionalise extra judicial practices based on the notion of retributive justice as culturally authentic and Islamically sanctioned. If the state continues to embed religious legality so as to reclaim and excavate an imagined ‘pure’ Islamic culture, then necessarily some historical moments within patriarchal culture and religion will overlap and logically, will condone stoning and honour killings.

When a woman minister for social welfare, Zille Huma, was shot at a public event by an ‘extremist’ for not adequately veiling herself in 2007, does that fall under cultural norms or religious sanction? Flogging is widely understood as a prescribed religious punishment subject to circumstances, judicial process and interpretation. In cases of adultery, blasphemy, wilful marriages and denying women their property rights by marrying them off to the holy book, cultural sanctions are often derived from or collude with existing religious laws. Thus until the law was amended in 2006, the Zina law became a tool of controlling women’s choice in marriage and her mobility, not so much about adultery. Even after the amendment, the basic premise of this law centres on the monitoring of women’s sexuality as a threat to social order. Blasphemy, if proven, is punishable by death but often, enraged Muslims take this law into their hands and use it as a moral justification to attack and even kill (usually) other Muslims. In most cases, the issue has nothing to do with blaspheming but is used to settle personal scores. Women’s marital choice is subject to permission from her *wali* or guardian. At best, some women legislators have attempted to make the state the *wali* rather than a woman’s male relative, which has been resisted by the right wing women representatives. In either case, the concept of a *wali* for women and minors remains a discriminatory requirement. The cultural practice of marrying a woman to the holy book (Quran) to deny her property rights was amended in 2005 under the Blasphemy law, as this crime is interpreted as an insult to the holy book not as a contravention of a woman’s basic right. Retributive justice, as meted out in cases of murder under the *Qisas* and *Diyat*<sup>56</sup> law, sustain cultural

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, pg 67.

<sup>56</sup> Those sections of the Pakistan Penal Code which relate to offences of murder and manslaughter were replaced in 1990 by the Qisas and Diyat Ordinance which redefines the offence and its punishment in Islamic terms. Qisas is equal punishment for the crime committed and diyat is compensation payable to the victims or their legal heirs.



norms of bartering compensation in return for a life taken, such as in (illegal) cultural practices like honour killings.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, some patriarchal cultural practices do not contravene the broader Islamic moral and social order, including attributing women lesser inheritance or minorities lesser status as citizens. The notion that since women are guaranteed (lesser) inheritance rights in Islam, so at least these cannot be (theoretically) resisted or denied due to any competing cultural practices, is a defeatist one. If one is to only obtain theoretical rights, then they may as well be equal, as prescribed by universal civil code not religious prescription. Religion is not a logic that is going to be accepted as a piece of legislation particularly if it challenges patriarchal norms. This piecemeal logic is also applied in other cases where 'progressive' interpretations of religion are appreciated as successful implantations of Islamic ethos. These always stop short of being equal for women with the understanding that if such an attempt would be made, such laws would be unsuccessful since they do not accommodate the expectations of normative religion nor the cultural environment as determined by patriarchy.

However, such arguments are more problematic when cultural practice and religious ethos do contravene each other. Then which will supersede, cultural authenticity or Islam? It is very much like the question: Which came before, the chicken or the egg? The argument that there is significant debate within Islamic tradition and *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *ijma* (consensus) is the derivative method of legislating a religious law, is simply an attempt to justify another way of bringing (western) rationality and commonsense into the religious discourse. Gen. Musharraf's liberal intervention which led him to issue a reference against the proposed Hisbah Bill of the religious right government in NWFP, allowed the Supreme Court to strike down the bill. That is how the Council of Islamic Ideology operates and courts in Pakistan too. By and large, they tend to respond to the political mood and leadership of the period.

Every time the Council makes a humanistic, progressive or modernist interpretation (which coincides with the universalist human rights discourse) of an Islamic law, this is hailed as proof of the progressive spirit of Islam. In other words, the standard against which progress is measured in Muslim countries is often when women's Islamic rights are compared favourably against western or universal codes. Therefore, despite prescribed lesser status with regard to property, polygamy, law on adultery, child custody, evidence, blood money and so on, these Quranic prescriptions are always justified as requiring 'progressive' interpretation or rendered inapplicable if 'taken out of context' and thereby needing historical textual supporting evidence. This process is reductive rather than cumulative.

To presume that interpretations can be made in vacuum under some suspended historical period and under the pretence that, we are no longer defined by modernist discourse, is an unrealistic political expectation. Activism demands strategic alliances, as well as political positioning. When the opportunity came up to reform the Zina Ordinance in 2006 during Gen. Musharraf's government, women activists were not about to get

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<sup>57</sup> Crimes of honour are understood to flag a type of violence against women in its various manifestations from assault, confinement, and murder characterised by motivation rather than by perpetrator. Most often, women are victims of such crimes and are punished for violating or 'shaming' a male relative's 'honour' by exercising their agency through choice of marriage or perceived to transgress moral boundaries of gender relations as defined by male cultural norms.

caught up in a debate that had been circulating for 27 years. Eventually, the adultery laws were not repealed as the liberal women's movement had demanded but amended instead. The right wing women, who clearly stood against the original Zina Ordinance from the 1980s, formally opposed the call for repeal or amending the law for the first time in 25 years. They had shifted from their earlier academic position that the law was interpreted incorrectly. They had also rejected the political imperative behind such a law passed by Gen. Zia ul Haq. Some 25 years later, the right wing women shifted their strategic position on the law and followed the male dictate which insisted that any change in this law would convert Pakistan into a "free sex zone".<sup>58</sup> This was an absolute rejection of modernising a discriminatory law which targeted women and which compounded rape with adultery. This can be taken as evidence of the success of the agency of right wing women which is non-feminist, non-modernist but of course, is clearly not just political but very radical.

Certainly agency is not the monopoly of the vanguard and is arguably, even better organised and used by the rearguard too. However, there is a critical blindness within these analyses which disregard how this agency is converted into political articulation and its impact. The suggestion that this agency helps women in their personal politics is fine and coincides with the Islamic feminists' stance but this cannot stop here. When this agency spills into an organised, anti-women, anti-minorities political agenda, then the responsibility for the consequences of the exercise of such agency must also be equally appreciated.

The pragmatic proposal of a coalition of Islamic, secular and other feminisms in the form of 'hybrid feminisms'<sup>59</sup> as submitted by Huma Ahmed-Ghosh is less problematic in theory but strategically has proven to be unwise in the Pakistani experience. The concept of 'patriarchy trading' which allows women some agency by accepting patriarchy is a dormant and tentative precipice to put women on. Repeatedly, the experience of feminist alliances has shown that right wing politics manages to subsume and co-opt not just the tactics, vocabulary and strategies of feminism but even manages to subvert these for the most patriarchal ends. At first, Islamic feminists rethought the concept of the veil as more polysemic than the oriental and western feminist understanding of it. Now there is rethinking of polygamy, which is increasingly becoming a bargain that some (first wives) negotiate in order to gain domestic relief when second wives take over their duties. Certainly there are debates and contestations within the religious political discourse, particularly between male and female ideologues on the issue and place of women's rights. However, such competitive struggles also tend to pit the perceived 'good Muslim woman' who adheres to the more literal, conservative visions of the party against the challenging 'bad Muslim woman'. The hierarchies of these religious parties are severe and women cannot head them nor integrate into the mainstream decision-making process. Thus their intellectual agency is unlikely to

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<sup>58</sup> [http://www.thenews.com.pk/top\\_story\\_detail.asp?Id=4686](http://www.thenews.com.pk/top_story_detail.asp?Id=4686). Also see a response to the debate on this issue by Afiya Shehribano, 'A State of Suspended Disbelief', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Issue : VOL 43 No. 23 June 07 - June 13, 2008, [www.epw.org.in](http://www.epw.org.in)

<sup>59</sup> Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, 'Dilemmas of Islamic and Secular Feminists and Feminisms', *Journal of International Women's Studies* Vol. 9 #3, May 2008, [www.bridgew.edu/SOAS/jiws/May08/Huma.pdf](http://www.bridgew.edu/SOAS/jiws/May08/Huma.pdf)

contribute towards party policy unless they challenge the structures and roles for women members internally.

If rights are not informed or premised on the basis of universal rights, then these will be dependent on the limiting reformist agenda of patriarchal impulses within culture and Islam, as described above. If we start accepting non-feminist agendas and lack of active resistance to male domination as acceptable agency by women activists of religious parties, then what hope is there of even challenging the patriarchal elements within religious discourse? This position of the revivalists defeats the activism of both Islamic and secular feminists alike.

It is not just a political aversion that impedes liberal and Islamist women from coming together on women's issues. Rather, the discourse of women's rights has become a competitive one, whereby most contestants on the ideological spectrum attempt to appropriate the woman question as the marker or sign-post of their claim to political relevance. At least, the feminist agenda has been successful in making women's rights central to the debate but whether this is helping the realisation or furtherance of their rights is questionable.

When questioned on how the Zina laws should be amended, revivalist faculty members at the prestigious Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) in Pakistan insisted that all reformative debate must be posited within Islamic history, texts and cultural relevance.<sup>60</sup> They were of the view that the current amendment is untenable because it was done by a secular rationale. Such arguments guarantee postponement of resolution on any contentious issue, from equal rights in family and property laws, to *Qisas* and *Diyat* worth of a woman, with no assurance that in the ultimate analysis these will be decided in favour of equal rights.

Jamal suggests we avoid the "re-inscribing [of] a simple framework of universalism-versus-cultural particularity and instead attempt to understand [Jamaat women's] religious agency in their own terms as an unfolding universality...of the modern".<sup>61</sup> This is consistent with the unwillingness of revivalist scholars to comment on the political support and silence that Islamist women observe, when violations of women's rights take place and if victims are perceived to have transgressed prescribed modes of acceptable Islamic behaviour. The political record does not support the fact that Jamaat women prioritise women's rights in spite of the transgression. Thus, privatisation of women's empowerment, modernist or not, is a useful proposition, except it does not corroborate with the politically articulated record of religious political parties. In fact, precisely because it is "on their own terms", the agency of Islamic activist women contradicts and restricts other women's empowerment if its expression does not fit the religiously prescribed mould.

There is also no mention nor supporting evidence in the research by Jamal or Iqtidar of whether these women challenge structural patriarchy beyond attitudinal defiance within the religious discourse. While they may personally defy male wishes and question decisions, their political activism on the contrary, has only demonstrated in the Pakistani context, a resistance to women's independent legal or public status thus far.

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<sup>60</sup> An example of such revivalist scholarship and debate particularly emerging from LUMS can be found at <http://www.baytunur.blogspot.com/>

<sup>61</sup> Jamal, 2009, above cited, pg. 18.

The political performances and activism of women of religious parties in Pakistan in the last decade is contrary to the hope invested in a faith based progress on women's rights. If, as revivalists wish, docility and limited mobility in male-dominated religious outfits qualify as viable acts of women's rights, then perhaps we can claim that women's potential for progress is high in Pakistan. However, it is not possible to measure such progress without devising a new set of indicators and indices. Meanwhile, according to any commonsensical<sup>62</sup> indicators, there is no reason for such optimism and hope. Increased cases of stoning of women, floggings and beheadings, as well as a back-lash in cities where women are increasingly harassed by vigilante groups of men in the universities and streets demanding women cover themselves or remain indoors, are not signs of progress, presumably, by any definition.

So far, stoning and flogging is only known to take place in Taliban territory (with sporadic incidents spilling over into other areas) and is committed by their militants. However, the backlash in other parts of the country of harassment and violence to prevent women from being in public spaces or exercising choice is loosely being termed as 'Talibanization'. Talibanization is simply the colloquialism that is being used to refer to the growth of intolerance advocated in the name of religion and which is attempting to violently prevent women's mobility and education, as well as targeting shrines or other perceived 'unislamic' practices such as shaving beards or listening to music. This policy emerges not from the state nor is it just advocated by the Taliban media but in fact, is part of and supported by the discourse of mainstream religio-political parties, as well as non-institutional piety movements. They reject the Taliban ethos as extreme and 'unislamic' but imbibe and promote many of the same principles packaged in a less extreme or dramatic version. Such programmes to promote Islamic etiquette are also found in upper class clubs and theocratic societies and public and private universities. Religious discourse has subsumed all other forms of theory, philosophy and currency.

Regardless of the nature of leadership, whether it was a liberal General Musharraf or the earlier despotic Gen. Zia ul Haq, women have served as the ideological identity markers of the liberal or regressive potential of a regime. In political reality, they continue to lose the larger struggle for equal rights. Now, a defeatist academic proposal that attempts to seam together secularism with Islam, as a culturally viable project, relies on the agency demonstrated by the religio-political parties. This challenges the minimum expectation that equal rights for women and minorities should be a non-negotiable determinant of political activism and citizenry. In the process, feminist politics is a price such a project is willing to sacrifice if it does not fit the cultural, spiritual or political requirements of an increasingly conservative and anti women agenda of the religio-political forces in Pakistan.

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<sup>62</sup> I refer here to Nivedita Menon's discussion on the particular and the universal. She problematises the notion of what she calls 'the myth of free will' and calls for the need of a 'radical politics' which are "long term struggles to reclaim meaning at the level of common sense...to challenge local structures of power...the family and other hegemonising institutions". She also points out the limitations of the law in dealing with 'free will' and its 'unfreedom' though maintains that in democratic politics the notion of free will should be preserved for the right to proselytise and convert. Nivedita Menon, 'Recovering Subversion; Feminist Politics Beyond the Law', Permanent Black, 2004, India, pg 216.

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